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## It's No Laughing Matter

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# It's No Laughing Matter

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**T**rick-or-treat came a day early for those of us at University of Hawaii. As most of you know, on October 30th a river of mud flowed through the basement of Hamilton Library. The University's map collection, government documents collection, our technical services departments (cataloging, acquisitions, and serials), and the computer room housing the library's servers were demolished. It wasn't a treat.

Now why would this story have a place in a publication focusing on humor and librarians? Why I'd be happy to tell you. Many of us use humor as a coping tool. Is there a time when it ISN'T appropriate to laugh? How about when you are up to your knickers in mud? For the sake of sanity, that is EXACTLY the time when you need your sense of humor to see you through. It would have been impossible to enter that pit of destruction every day if we hadn't been able to laugh.

During the first two weeks after the flood I joined other library staff and volunteers in salvaging computing resources, the five dry percent of our government documents, about 20 percent of the library's 166,000 maps, including historic maps going back to the 1600s, and almost all of its 91,000 Trust Territory aerial photos. In case you aren't familiar, the Trust Territories of the Pacific are those Micronesian countries that had been ruled by Japan before World War II which became U.S. Territories after the War and are now independent countries.

## **What is so funny about that?**

Maybe you just had to be there, but on the second day of the salvage effort items had begun to mold and the air was getting nasty. I was pulling hanging file folders of aerial photos, which were filled with mud that I was squeezing out by hand. Mud wasn't the only thing in the folders; there were cockroaches in there as well. Bugs, frogs and snails brought more life than I wanted to see to the mess. The theme

song for the day (and we were all singing) was *I Don't Like Spiders and Snakes* by Jim Stafford. Yep, the giggles had set in.

After hours pulling maps and wading through thousands of destroyed books in Government Documents we went in search of our Electronic Resource Librarian's CPU. After clambering over huge piles of door-blocking debris and then sliding around in the mud, we came to a relatively clear area. In the middle of the clearing was a cardboard box containing four *Withdrawn* stamps. I took one look and declared that we MUST salvage those stamps as there were a couple of dump trucks of books in the next room that were headed that direction. You can bet that we laughed.

## **How many librarians does it take to "un-secure" a computer?**

Have you ever thought of what you would do if you needed to clear out your computer room in a hurry? Remember those security cables we all install? Here is a *news flash*; it is incredibly difficult to cut through those cables with bolt cutters! I won't tell you how long we tried, or how many of us were involved in the effort. Luckily a student came along and asked if we had a flat-blade screwdriver. She then went from computer to computer effortlessly popping off the brackets through which the cables were threaded. Now I should have thought of that!

## **Hidden treasure**

Before the flood I kept the staff lounge refrigerator stocked with cold drinks for my coworkers. Several days after the flood I noticed the metal cabinet storing extra sodas was nowhere to be found. As it turns out the cabinet had washed downstream about 30 yards. A relatively bright spot that day was to uncover a dozen cases of soda. Sure we had to wash the cans with antibacterial soap before we could open them, but it was a



## Action Figure

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would set a tone for the LAF that would let the world see that librarians are not uptight and don't take themselves and their profession too seriously; we can laugh at ourselves.

Little did we know that there would be people who wouldn't see the humor, or the fondness with which the LAF was conceived and produced. It's hard to imagine that anyone looking at the packaging, which is basically a huge tribute to librarians and reading, could possibly be offended, but as I now know, there's no predicting people's response. I actually got two unsigned e-mails from people saying that I had set the profession back 30 years! But in all of my recent travels around the country to promote my new book, *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every*

*Mood, Moment, and Reason*, and in the many e-mails, letters and phone calls I have received, the vast majority of librarians love the idea of an action figure in their honor.

### The end

My (brief) life as an action figure has generally been good. The only problem seems to be that now I don't quite know what to aspire to next. After you've been plasticized, what worlds are left to conquer? 

Nancy Pearl is the author of *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason*, and its companion, with all new books and categories, *More Book Lust*, due out in May 2005.

## Laughing

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hidden treasure nonetheless. Maybe part of the therapeutic value in this *find* was using a hammer to beat the cabinet open. Remember, there is a physical component to humor after all.

### Looking on the bright side

Some would argue that sarcastic humor doesn't belong in the workplace. In the midst of the recovery effort some of us were in the trenches, squeezing cockroaches out of folders, and were covered with mud. Other staff members opted to stay clean. A mud-covered colleague encouraged me to hug one of our pristinely clean coworkers. I still regret passing up

that opportunity, but just the thought still makes me laugh. When our humor resources were at their lowest we would pull out the sarcasm and point out the bright side of this disaster; no more cataloging backlog!

In writing this article I asked my fellow workers what we were laughing at during those difficult times and they all agree—a whole lot of nothing. Clearly, we just knew that we had to use humor to work through the disaster. Recovery efforts at the Hamilton Library continue and let's hope each of us involved in the effort continues to retain and use our sense of humor during this challenging time. 